

Introduction

When blond, handsome, fearless Yaron Zehavi, commander of the Hasamba gang, defied the evil British policeman Jack Smith, who threatened to throw him and his valiant comrades in jail, how different he seemed from the cowed and pious Diaspora *yeshiva* boy in Europe! Here was the new Jew, born and bred on his own land, free of the inhibitions and superstitions of earlier ages; even his physique was superior to that of his cousins in the old country. Zehavi, the hero of the most popular series of children's books produced by the new State of Israel, was the classic Sabra, a native-born Israeli modeled on the ideal that the books' author, Yigal Mosinzon, himself exemplified. Zehavi represented what has been described as a sudden and nearly total sociocultural revolution that, in a historical instant, produced a new society and culture with its own customs and codes and a new language and literature. Yet in important ways, many of which they would have vehemently denied, the Sabras were embedded in the Jewish culture that preceded them and can be understood only in its context.

This book is about the second generation of Zionist Israelis, the first generation to be educated and socialized within the Yishuv—the Jewish community in Palestine. It portrays them and tries to understand them and their influence on the society around them largely through an analysis of the writings they produced.

The Sabras were a product of what historians call the Hebrew revolution. That revolution's first generation has generally been called the

pioneer generation, while the second generation has been called the Sabra generation. The Sabra generation includes the Jews born in Palestine toward the end of World War I through the 1920s and 1930s who were educated in social frameworks belonging, formally or informally, to the labor movement of the Yishuv, as well as immigrants who arrived in Palestine as youngsters (alone or with their families) and were assimilated into the same milieu. These social institutions included the *kibbutzim*, the *moshavim*, and their schools; the Hebrew gymnasiums (academic high schools) in the large cities; the agricultural youth villages (agricultural vocational boarding schools); the pioneering youth movements; the premilitary corps such as the Chagam and the Gadna; the Palmach and its brigades in the War of Independence and, after the founding of the state, the Nachal and the first elite units of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—Commando Unit 101, the paratroopers, the marine commandos, and the pilots—who continued the Palmach tradition.

This book's definition of the Sabra is thus not biological (someone born in Palestine) but cultural—a generational unit identified not by country of birth, but rather by affiliation to the institution that imprinted a specific culture on these young people. As already indicated, the term includes immigrants who came to Palestine as children and whose personalities were shaped in the melting pot of Sabra socialization. They were generally considered full-fledged Sabras by both themselves and their comrades, as well as by the older generation.

The Sabra generation's beliefs were molded by the Hebrew-Zionist educational system in Palestine. This was a generation for whom Hebrew was the language of conversation and of reading, and who were educated under the mythical aura of the pioneer settler and defender. They studied in schools and boarding schools affiliated with the labor movement—the socialist Zionist political parties united under the aegis of the Histadrut labor federation—or schools belonging to the general educational system sponsored by the Jewish Agency. They spent many of their adolescent hours in youth movement chapter houses and volunteered after completing high school to work in agricultural settlements (those who grew up in moshavim and kibbutzim did so as a matter of family duty, while young people from the cities arrived in the settlements under the sponsorship of the youth movements and as part of Palmach's agricultural-military training units, the *hachsharot*). The Sabras fought in the Haganah, the Palmach and, during World War II, in the British army,

as well as in IDF combat units in the War of Independence and in the Sinai Campaign.

The Sabra generation's temporal boundaries are generally set at 1930 and 1960. In other words, we are concerned with a group of people whose formative years coincided with the formative years of the new Israeli society.¹ The generation began when solid foundations were laid for the pioneer youth movements, the kibbutzim and moshavim, the Jewish urban centers (largely Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa), and the Hebrew educational system, and it ended in the period of the Sinai Campaign, the absorption of the massive immigration from the Islamic world, and the establishment and institutionalization of the new state's organs of government.

There is reasonably accurate data enumerating those who belonged to these Sabra institutions over a period of years, meaning those who were guided by the model of Sabra behavior. This leads to an estimate that the Sabra generation numbered in the area of 5,000 to 8,000 in the 1930s and about 20,000 at the time the State of Israel was established. In other words, we are talking about a group that was no larger than 10 percent of the total population of the Yishuv. Since the Sabra generation is a sociological and not a biological group, it is hard to compute precisely how many young people fit the Sabra profile perfectly or nearly perfectly. Even the Palmach had a heterogeneous membership. It included high school graduates, working youth who had not completed their schooling, Holocaust refugees, and volunteers from overseas. Many of the young people who passed through the Sabra melting pot lacked some of the classic traits discussed in this book. For example, they might not have looked like Sabras, they might not have spoken with a Sabra accent, and they might not have had Hebraicized names. The conversations I conducted with members of the generation and my examination of the primary and secondary sources have led me to the conclusion that the classic Sabras—those who matched the profile presented in this work perfectly, or nearly so—were a minority within a minority. They numbered no more than a few hundred and comprised the counselors and commanders who were what sociologists call the “generational nucleus.” They were the leading group that served as a behavioral model for the entire generation. This book focuses on the nucleus, not on the entire generation. The great gulf between the Sabras' low representation in the population at large and their huge cultural influence is perhaps the secret of their fascination and their importance in the history of Israeli society and culture.

The Term “Sabra”

Ironically, the *tzabar*, or prickly pear cactus, is not native to Israel. It was introduced from Central America some two hundred years ago, but quickly acclimatized. In fact, it took hold so well in Palestine that it became one of the country’s best-known features. Even before it became a symbol for the country’s Jewish natives, the *tzabar*, or “sabra,” cactus appeared in paintings, stories, and songs of local artists and was cited by visitors as one of the outstanding visual elements of the Palestinian landscape.

The widespread use of the word “Sabra” as a generic term for the generation of native-born Israelis began in the 1930s, but the first glimmerings of a generational term can be seen forty years earlier in the use of the Biblical term “Hebrew.” This term spread through the Jewish community in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and became one of the key words of the Zionist movement.² It was very common during the period of the pre-state Yishuv, especially in reference to the younger generation. Both “Hebrew” and “Sabra,” which was used alongside “Hebrew” in the thirties and forties and replaced it in the fifties, were meant to denote the growing distinction that the Zionists made between the Jew of the Diaspora and the “new Jew”—the native Jew of Palestine.³

Some trace the source of the term “Sabra” to the use of the same word, with a Yiddish inflection, by the immigrants of the Second and Third Aliyot in the 1920s and 1930s. They used it to refer to the first natives produced by the Zionist movement—the young people whose parents had come to Palestine during the last two decades of the nineteenth century as part of the First Aliya. Whether or not this etymology is correct, we know that these young natives referred to themselves not as Sabras but as *etrogim* (“citrons”)—another term taken from the local flora—or by the Biblical term “Gideons.”⁴

In time—during the 1930s, and even more clearly in the 1940s—“Sabra” changed from a derogatory term to one of endearment. The emphasis was no longer on the cactus’s sharp spines but rather on the contrasting sweet pulp of its fruit. This was taken as a metaphor for the native Israeli, whose rough, masculine manner was said to hide a delicate and sensitive soul. The appellation contained another symbolic comparison—just as the prickly pear grew wild on the land, so were the native-born Israelis growing, so it was said, naturally, “without complexes,” in their true homeland.

Credit for the transformation of the term “Sabra,” now with a modern Hebrew pronunciation, into a generic term for the native-born Israelis was claimed (rightfully, as far as I have been able to discover) by the journalist Uri Kesari. On 18 April 1931, the newspaper *Do’ar Ha-Yom* published an essay by Kesari titled “We Are the Leaves of the Sabra!” It charged that the Zionist institutions were discriminating against the native-born Jews, the Sabras, and giving preference to Russian and German Jews “and the rest of the Ashkenazim.”⁵ Kesari’s contemporaries, especially the artists among them, quickly began using the term and the symbol of the sabra, and slowly inculcated them into the collective consciousness, as Dan Almagor relates:

Less than two weeks after the appearance of Kesari’s essay, the publisher . . . produced a new humorous pamphlet named *Tzabar*. On 19 April 1932—precisely a year and a day after the birth of the new epithet—the poet Yehuda Karni published, in the illustrated newspaper *Kolnoa* in Tel Aviv, a poem entitled “In the Homeland of the Sabra,” in which he told of an encounter with a young Sabra. On that very same day there appeared, under an article by the Jewish-Polish film director Alexander Ford in the literary weekly *Ketuvim*, the following note: “The cinema director is currently preparing a film on life in Palestine—*The Sabra*.” Two months later the editors of *Ketuvim* reiterated, under another piece by Ford, that he was “preparing in Palestine the movie *The Sabra*.” The production of the Israeli film *The Sabra* was not completed for various reasons, but the new term had already taken root, even among educators. When the first issue of *Ofakim*, the newspaper of the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza’ir movement devoted to problems of education and society, first appeared in December 1932, the introductory editorial already referred to the “Sabra spirit.”⁶

The Sabra as a Cultural Archetype

The burgeoning popularity of the term “Sabra” in the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s reflected the rising prestige of the second generation of the labor movement, which in those years was achieving political and cultural hegemony in the Yishuv. (An example of the link between the ensconcement of the labor movement as the leading social and political movement and the transformation of the Sabra into a cultural hero can be seen in a 1943 advertisement for Sabra Shaving Cream produced by the Histadrut’s Shemen factory. It shows a picture of a smiling prickly pear spread with shaving foam and the slogan “Even the stubborn Sabra beard surrenders to Shemen.”)

As the Sabra archetype and stereotype took shape, the students at the Hebrew gymnasiums, the young people of the kibbutzim and moshavim,

and the members of the youth movements and the Palmach began developing a consciousness about their cultural uniqueness. They also produced and honed native status symbols and a peculiarly native Israeli style in language, dress, and collective leisure culture. Novelist Moshe Shamir, a Sabra who followed the typical socialization path of the members of his generation, was apparently the first to express this consciousness in writing. In an article he published in one of the *Yalkut Ha-Re'im* pamphlets (anthologies written and edited by Sabra writers, produced at the beginning of the 1940s), he wrote: "I am a member of the revolutionary generation, and I feel a sense of collaboration with all those who were born [with me]." ⁷ But the first to express this generational consciousness through the concept of the Sabra and with an emphasis on the Sabra style as distinct from that of the pioneer was the journalist Uri Avneri. Perhaps not coincidentally, Avneri was not a native-born Israeli but had immigrated from Germany as a boy. He was assimilated into his new country via the Sabra institutions, losing all signs of his Diaspora origins except for his accent. ⁸ In September 1946 Avneri published two articles on Sabraism in the periodical *Ba-Ma'avak*: "The Floor to the Israeli Generation!" and "Who Are These Sabras?" These articles sang the praises of the *Yalkut Ha-Re'im* collections and identified them as the manifestations of a healthy and welcome rebellion against the older generation, which was depicted as a band of old and degenerate men and women holding sway over Jewish society in Palestine. Avneri considered Sabraism the culmination of the anti-Diaspora vision and made one of the most extreme cultural distinctions of that period between the Jew and the Israeli. "Moshe Shamir," he wrote in reference to Shamir's article in *Yalkut Ha-Re'im*, "views the Diaspora in all its bleakness—as a proud, healthy Israeli man. . . . This is the most glorious victory of the Israeli generation—to see the sons of the Diaspora cured and made upright as they are absorbed and assimilate into his way of life." ⁹

Avneri's words were an indirect echo of the view that a new Israeli or Hebrew nation had come into being. This proposition was in the air among Tel Aviv youth at the beginning of the 1940s and produced the Canaanite circle led by the poet Yonatan Ratosh. ¹⁰ It was no coincidence that Yitzchak Yatziv, journalist and editor of the children's newspaper *Davar Le-Yeladim*, attacked the Canaanite phenomenon in an article entitled "Sabraism as an Ideology," ¹¹ published in the Histadrut daily newspaper, *Davar*, close to the time that Avneri's article appeared. The Canaanite view was in fact an extreme and somewhat simplistic ideological expression of a spontaneous cultural process that had begun

within the Yishuv as early as the 1920s—the creation of a local native culture cut off from the traditional Jewish way of life and influenced by the ecological and cultural environment of Palestine and by the ideology of the Yishuv's labor movement.¹² A radical expression of this view was presented in an essay, “Hebrews and Not Sabras,” published in October 1949 by Amos Keinan in *Bamat Elef*, a periodical put out by the Canaanite group at the end of the War of Independence. In Keinan's opinion, the Sabras of his generation (the fighters of 1948) had not yet liberated themselves from their roots in the Diaspora:

The spiritual image of the Sabra is not the product of a natural and continual development. The Sabra is the outgrowth of an extremely strange adulteration. There are two worlds here. Our parents who are not Sabras, with all their years in this country—and us. . . . The renaissance that we await is not Zionist and is not Jewish. It is Hebrew.¹³

Keinan, with the naiveté of the revolutionary, erred in not identifying the umbilical cord linking Judaism and Zionism. The Canaanite vision of “the land of the Hebrews, the land of the Euphrates” in which the Jew would be transformed into the Hebrew, has not been realized to this day. But he was correct to point out that a new nation had come into being in Palestine and that a new Israeli national image had been fashioned, completely different from the image of the Jew who lived outside Palestine.

The cultural phenomenon called Sabraism, the authentic culture of native Israeli youth, ostensibly appeared even earlier, during World War I, among the children of the First Aliya, the young people who had broken away from the established pre-Zionist Jewish community in Jerusalem and Jaffa, and the members of the first graduating class of the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. Avshalom Feinberg—who would later be called the first Sabra—and Aharon Aharonson were the prototypes of the Sabra who had been born in the *moshavot*, while Eliahu Golomb, Dov Hoz, Shaul Avigur, David Hakohen, and Moshe Sharret were to a large extent the prototypes of the Sabra graduate of the gymnasium.¹⁴ These young people already had Sabra characteristics, such as a rough and direct way of expressing themselves, a knowledge of the land, a hatred of the Diaspora, a native sense of supremacy, a fierce Zionist idealism, and Hebrew as their mother language. Nevertheless, most scholars of the origins of Zionism agree today that these were no more than the first glimmerings of the Sabra phenomenon. It came into its own only in the 1930s and 1940s, when there was for the first time a large group of native-born Israelis in the kibbutzim, moshavim, and established neighborhoods of

the cities. This was the period that saw the development of the youth movement and Palmach cultures and the artistic, ideological, and linguistic expressions of the Israeli natives. Only then did Sabraism become a fully elaborated phenomenon.

The Sabra's prestige, the consensus about how the Sabra should look, and the use of the term itself peaked during, and especially after, the 1948 War of Independence. The Israeli public, in particular the older generation, tended to attribute the war's achievements to the native-born Sabras and "Sabraized" immigrants; they minimized the role played, for example, by those new immigrants who had entered combat immediately upon their arrival in the country.¹⁵ Examples may be found in the official army newspapers as well as in the unofficial newsletters put out by the battalions and regiments during and after the war. Many of their pages (especially their front and back covers) are illustrated with drawings and photographs of male and female combatants of a typical Sabra appearance, wearing the characteristic Palmach garb (stocking cap, Arab head-dress, etc.). The Palmach-Sabra experience—the native slang, the campfires, the sing-alongs—was stressed in these newspapers. Another reason why the fighting Sabra was prominent in the national saga of 1948 was that most of the victory albums and war literature recounting the impressions of the fighters from the front were written by Sabra writers, most of whom had served in the Palmach.¹⁶

The culture of memorialization that developed after the war played a central role in mythologizing the native Israeli and fixing the term "Sabra." The victory's heavy price in lives lost left the older generation with a sense of guilt intermingled with deep gratitude for the younger generation—especially for the Palmach, the "favorite son" of the Yishuv leadership, which had lost many of its fighters. This feeling found expression in the press, in art, and especially in the wide-ranging memorial literature. The term "Sabra" appeared over and over again in the memorial anthologies for the fallen of 1948, including the official anthologies put out by the Ministry of Defense.¹⁷ It turned into something of a linguistic code for expressing the nation's love for its loyal youth.

During that same period the stereotypical Sabra appeared as a cultural hero in the arts—in fiction, poetry, songs, painting, sculpture, cinema, theater, and entertainment.¹⁸ The war albums gave prominent placement to photographs of Sabras, especially Palmach fighters with—as a well-known song described—their "handsome forelocks and countenances." A photograph of Avraham Eden ("Bren"), a good-looking Palmach commander of typical Sabra appearance, raising an "inked"

Israeli flag (an improvised flag painted onto white fabric with ink) in Eilat, became the symbol of the young nation and reflected the symbolic-mythological parallel between the beauty of the ancient country and the youthful beauty of its Sabra sons. Young people who resembled Eden began to appear prominently as heroic Sabra characters in cinema, theater, and advertisements.

An especially important contribution to grounding the mythological image of the Sabra was made by the artists and cartoonists, for example Arie Navon, Shmuel Katz, and Dosh (Kriel Gardush), whose drawings illustrated articles on the war and on the IDF that appeared in the daily press, especially the military press (some cartoonists also published collections of their drawings). “We were then sort of journalist-artists,” related Yossi Stern:

There was a common concept then of putting a journalist and an illustrator together. The illustrator was like a news photographer. We would be given a jeep and would travel into the hot areas. Many of my Palmachniks were walking around the streets of Jerusalem. They were our heroes, the liberators of the city. Heroes from our mythology. They jumped off jeeps—red-haired kibbutzniks with stocking caps or Arab headdresses on their heads, the city favorites. . . . From the dust and the stocking cap we tried to create something new.¹⁹

These artists, who had a very sharp “cultural eye,” memorialized the image of the Sabra in his shorts and sandals, with his slipshod appearance and his hair falling over his forehead, in drawings and cartoons. They brought out the stereotypical Sabra charm—youth, roguishness, self-confidence, boldness, and common sense. In some of the drawings the Sabras appear next to a prickly pear cactus as a kind of generational marker.

The Sabra dialect and slang, which took form in the youth movements, the youth villages, the military organizations, and the kibbutzim in the 1930s and 1940s, began to spread in the 1950s to larger social circles, in response to the joy that the rest of Israeli society took in the bristly younger generation. The disseminators of Sabraism were largely young writers, journalists, and artists (some of them former Palmachniks) with good eyes and ears who documented and spread the young folklore and humor. Native Sabra Hebrew, with its experiential layers and its fine cultural distinctions, became very common in the newsletters of the youth movements, the Gadna, and the army. It appeared in songs, in skits performed by army entertainment groups like the Chizbatron and the Nachal Troupe, in plays for children and adults (the most notable ex-

amples being Yigal Mosinson's *On the Negev Plains* and Moshe Shamir's dramatization of his novel *He Walked in the Fields*), and in literature for children and teenagers. In 1951 the term "Sabras" appeared in the satirical lexicon *The Laughter of Our Mouths* by humorist Efraim Davidzon. In the margin of the page, under "notes and clarifications," the author wrote: "The unique Sabra language and their style in life and literature, heralding a refashioning of the Hebrew language, have spurred debates in the press and in literature. The Sabras have created new concepts and terms and stylistic elements that were not known to previous generations. . . ." ²⁰

The daily press also began to grant entry to Sabra style, fawning over the spoken Hebrew of the natives, the first fruits of Zionism. A humor column called "Those Sabras," which quoted the linguistic gems of Sabra children, was published in the weekly supplement *Davar Ha-Shavua* from 1951 onward, and a similar column appeared in *Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh* four years later. The innovative personal column "Uzi and Co.," written by Amos Keinan (who inherited it from Benyamin Tammuz) and published in the paper *Ha'aretz* from 1950 to 1952, was written wholly in colloquial conversational Hebrew and was widely imitated.

An important contribution to the assimilation of Sabra culture and the Sabra spirit into Israeli life in the 1950s was made by *Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh*, under the editorship of Uri Avneri and Shalom Cohen. These two veterans of the Givati Brigade tried, with no small success, to fashion a young, playful, and rebellious magazine in the spirit of the Palmach. Along the same lines was the "What's New" column written by Dahn Ben-Amotz, which appeared in *Davar Ha-Shavua* and in which the characteristic direct, frank language of the native—what the Sabras called talking *dugri*—was prominent. ²¹

The early 1950s also witnessed the growth of a documentary and nostalgic literature on the period of the underground movements and the War of Independence, with the fighting Sabra as its focus. This included stories for children and teenagers produced by such Palmach veterans as Yigal Mosinson, O. Hillel, and Yisrael Visler (Puchu). This literature also contributed to ensconcing and exalting the Sabra mythological image and heightened the identification of the hero of 1948 with the Sabra. The most important anthology of that time was *The Palmach Book*, edited by Zerubavel Gilad and Matti Megged, which appeared in 1953. ²² The book was a nostalgic summary of the Palmach-Sabra life and indirectly a collective declaration by the members of the Palmach generation of their historic place in the Israeli epic.

Among the books for children and teenagers that contributed to the glorification of and fondness for Sabra culture, three in particular deserve mention. The first is Yemima Tchernovitz-Avidar's *Eight on the Heels of One* (1945), a spy story of adventure and heroics that takes place on a kibbutz and is connected to the Haganah's activity. The second, by Puchu (Yisrael Visler), is *A Gang Like This*, published in 1950, which tells the youthful experiences of a group of Palmach enlistees. The third is Yigal Mosinson's Hasamba series, which began to appear in 1950 and garnered a huge readership. The heroes of the series, who play pranks on the British and Arabs, are Sabra figures whose very names testify to their Sabra identity (especially Yaron Zehavi, the commander of the Hasamba gang, and Tamar, his deputy). The three works have common elements: Sabra heroes; their linguistic style (colloquial Hebrew in the youth movement and Palmach idiom); the youthful way of life in the kibbutz, the youth movement, and the Palmach; and the integration of suspense and humor, appropriate to the spirit of the times. Sabras of several decades avidly devoured these books and internalized their cultural messages.²³

An example of the waxing popularity of the Sabra image in the 1950s can be found in a review of the play *On Children and Adults*, staged by the Ha-Matateh Theater in 1953:

A "Sabra" play written by a writer who is almost "Sabra," directed by a born "Sabra" and presented by a theater that has the right to call itself a "Sabra" theater (Ha-Matateh) in a hall with typical "Sabra" conditions (nail heads in the chairs) and before a "heterogeneous" audience ("Sabra" and not "Sabra") that laughs without stopping and enjoys a pleasant show that, despite its many shortcomings, is quite charming.²⁴

In the 1950s the Palmach humorists, led by Chaim Cheffer, Didi Manosi, Shaul Biber, and Dahn Ben-Amotz, succeeded in turning the Palmach experience into a flourishing (for that period) entertainment industry. Chaim Cheffer's book of songs *Light Ammunition*, published in 1949, was very popular. So was Didi Manosi's 1951 book of rhymed satires, *Vacation without Pay*, epitomizing Palmach slang and wit. Both these books were important milestones in the dissemination and institutionalization of the Palmach experience. Another such work is the 1956 bestseller *Pack of Lies*, a collection of Palmach and youth movement anecdotes and jokes—what were called *chizbatim*—by Dahn Ben-Amotz and Chaim Cheffer, which had been published in 1953 in *Masa*, the literary magazine of the Ahdut Ha-Avodah party. This small book had a

red cover displaying a drawing of a steaming *finjan*, or Arab coffee pot, one of the Palmach's symbols. Its protagonists were the amiable Ofer, Musa, and Fat Chaim—Palmachnik Dennis the Menaces who created a new fashion of stinging local-native-nostalgic humor. At parties, at youth movement activities, even on the Voice of Israel and on IDF Radio, everyone started telling jokes and *chizbatim* according to this model. The army magazine *Ba-Machaneh* had a regular department for *chizbatim* called "When the Coins Had Holes in Them," by Shaul Biber, and the Gadna magazine, *Ba-Machaneh Gadna*, had a similar department called "The Association of Truthtellers, Inc." by Yossi Rimon.

In the middle of the 1950s Yossi Gamzo began publishing rhymed burlesques in *Ba-Machaneh Gadna* under the pen name Yossi Ein Manosi. These starred the lovable image of the Sabra and were illustrated with caricatures by Shmuel Katz. The poems, written in the spirit of Didi Manosi and Chaim Cheffer, represented the voice of the Sabras of the 1950s—called "the generation of the decade"—who imitated the Palmach Sabras of the 1940s and expanded Sabra culture.²⁵

In the mid-1950s the Voice of Israel began broadcasting the satirical program "Three in a Boat" with Shalom Rosenfeld, Gabriel Tsifroni, Amnon Ahi Na'ami, Dahn Ben-Amotz, and their guests. The program was broadcast once a month on a Saturday morning and was hugely popular. Ben-Amotz, a former Palmachnik and a young writer, quickly became the unchallenged star of the program. After immigrating to Palestine alone at a young age, he had been "Sabraized" in the melting pot of the youth village at Ben Shemen and became one of the most important disseminators of Sabra culture. His biographer, Amnon Dankner, terms him "a symbol of the Israeli Sabra," and notes that the country's public relations officials used Ben-Amotz to represent Israeli culture to the world.²⁶ The program was based on an undercurrent of confrontation between Diaspora and native Israeli culture, especially via the witty dialogue between Shalom Rosenfeld (the parliamentary correspondent for the daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*) and Ben-Amotz. "Rosenfeld," Dankner writes, "was a representative—a shining one, it should be said—of the old-time humor, of the world that was beginning to pass on, very Jewish, very Diaspora-Polish, full of puns, one word falling upon another. He was the diametric opposite of Dahn, who was outspoken and sometimes rude—such an Israeli original. The boat rocked between these two poles, and roughly one could say that Dahn drew the young people and Shalom drew the adults among the program's huge audience."²⁷ With his Sabra jokes, the cynical short skits he wrote and performed, his

pointed retorts, and his sharp Sabra accent and diction (nothing of the kind had ever been heard, at least with this frequency, on the national radio station before), Ben-Amotz contributed to the dissemination of Sabra humor, language, and image, and to the rising popularity of the Palmach generation.

The Sabra Writers as Generational Spokesmen

A decisive role in shaping the Sabra stereotype, myth, and concept was played by the literary elite of the Palmach generation. This group of writers and poets, most of whom had been members of pioneering youth movements, began publishing their works at the end of the 1930s and, especially in the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, slowly made their way into the literary establishment as the “young guard” of Israeli writers.²⁸ Gershon Shaked, scholar of Hebrew literature, identifies the first appearance of native Israeli fiction with the publishing of S. Yizhar’s first story, “Efraim Returns to the Alfalfa” in 1938 in the periodical *Gilyonot*. “Yizhar,” Shaked writes, “published his works before all his literary fellows as a kind of elder brother, and many followed after him in any number of areas.”²⁹ At the end of the 1940s several writers and poets of Yizhar’s generation began publishing their works, first in the youth movement newspapers (*Al Ha-Choma*, *Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza’ir*, *Ba-Mivchan*) and afterward in the labor movement newspapers and journals (*Dapim Le-Sifrut*, *Ba-Sha’ar*, *Masa*, *Davar*, *Mishmar*). These writers and poets were influenced a great deal by two prominent authors of that time—Avraham Shlonsky and Natan Alterman. Shlonsky and Alterman, in turn, took great interest in the up-and-coming Sabra culture, fostered and disseminated the young literature, and drew public attention to the younger generation.

Some consider the four issues of *Yalkut Ha-Re’im*, which came out between 1943 and 1945 (edited by Moshe Shamir, Shlomo Tanai, and Ozer Rabin), to be the first manifesto of the literary, and indirectly generational, independence of the Sabras. These issues included stories, poems, translations, and essays, all by Sabra writers in their twenties.³⁰ Moshe Shamir’s own essay “With the Members of My Generation” expresses his generation’s sense of uniqueness and destiny. “All of them—they are members of my generation. There is nothing that unites us more than the feeling of responsibility to the generation. Above and beyond the hesitations of creativity and the trappings of modernism, the shades

of independent personality, there beats within us a feeling of absolute belonging, one hundred percent, to the human revolution.”³¹

Another literary anthology, *A New Page for Literature, Art, and Criticism*, appeared in the wake of *Yalkut Ha-Re'im*, in September 1947. Edited by Chaim Glickstein, Moshe Shamir, and Shlomo Tanai, this was intended to be a monthly, but only one issue was published. It included poems, stories, critiques, articles on theater, and “meditations” by the younger generation. In 1948 the Neuman Press put out a first collection of stories by young Sabra fighters: *In the Front Position: Stories from the Campaign*. Soon thereafter came three others—*The Bow of the Writers: A Literary Collection of Soldier Writers*, put out by the IDF Cultural Service; *In the Test of the Battles*; and an anthology of articles by military correspondents from the War of Independence, *In the Footsteps of the Fighters*, published by Sifriat Po'alim. The war experiences that were at the center of these stories reinforced the perception of their authors as having an independent generational identity. At the same time, the first books of Sabra poetry, songs, and prose, expressing the native's worldview and emotions, began to appear. These elicited enthusiastic public response. The Sabra literary guard reached the height of its popularity, especially among the young second generation of Sabras,³² at the end of the 1950s with the appearance of the anthology *A Generation in the Country* (edited by Ezriel Ochmani, Shlomo Tanai, and Moshe Shamir), containing the works of thirty-three young writers and poets, and S. Yizhar's *Ziklag Days*. In fact, a literary “opposition” was already emerging at this time but was still in its infancy.

The Sabra writers and poets could be distinguished by four trademarks, other than their young age: (1) Hebrew was their native language, or at least the language of their childhood; (2) they wrote about Sabra life and the daily routine of life in the Palmach, the youth group, the kibbutz, the agricultural training groups, and the battlefield, and identified with it utterly; (3) many of the protagonists of the stories were typical Sabras; (4) their writing was seasoned, in greater or lesser measure, with Sabra slang and style and with the characteristic humor of the native Israelis.³³

In the public eye, however, these writers and poets portrayed the new generation not only in their style of writing and in the content of their stories and poems, but also in their own biographies, which were similar to those of their protagonists. The Sabra biographies that characterized both the young writers and their writings were also among the reasons for the warmth, and sometimes even enthusiasm and wonderment, with which they were usually received by the literary establish-

ment (the publishers, literary supplements, and established literary journals). In 1950, a few years after the new guard entered public consciousness, literary scholar Ezriel Ochmani described the response among critics and scholars: "They made a place for themselves. . . . The new names broke through one after another. It was visible: an entire unit had set out to conquer Hebrew prose, taking upon itself the great responsibility of meeting expectations that had been in the air for many years, potent and demanding—the expectation of an Israeli prose."³⁴

From the time they were first published, the Sabra writers stressed their uniqueness, which reinforced the Israeli public's view that what had arisen was not only a new literary generation, but a new cultural generation with an authentic "Land of Israel" style. In his introduction to the anthology *Spectrum of Writers*, Moshe Shamir wrote: "This band of creative artists, whose works are given in the book before you, are united not only by a uniform, but also by the melody of their accents; they have a common denominator and it shows itself in their words—today and tomorrow as well. The year 1948 is the common denominator."³⁵

Indeed, the experience of the War of Independence became the most important trademark of this young literary guard and, indirectly, of the Sabra generation it represented. It was not for nothing that this generation would later be called the "1948 generation."

The social importance of the works of these writers and poets was much greater than their artistic importance, though they had artistic value. With their typical Sabra biographies and typical Sabra experiences at kibbutzim, in youth movements, and in the Palmach, they felt the spirit of the era "in real time" and committed it to paper in their works. In the poem "Here Lie Our Bodies," for example, Chaim Guri expressed the shock his generation felt at the massacre of a detachment of thirty-five soldiers, even though he did not know most of them personally and was, in fact, not even in the country when they were killed. He was able to do this because the fallen were his contemporaries, had grown up in the same environment he had, and had been educated with the same values that had been instilled in him. Guri may not have intended it, but his special talent made him a voice of his generation. Furthermore, the Sabra writers and poets were not merely "cultural sponges," instruments for memorializing Sabra experience and folklore as they collected them from lives. Their works influenced those lives. With their genius for invention and their sensitivity, these authors reinforced the emotions and moral worldview of the members of their generation, codified their values, and rooted them firmly in the consciousness of both the Sabras and the public at large.

The Sinai Campaign at the end of 1956, in which the Israeli army dealt a humiliating defeat to the Egyptian army, was perceived by the Israeli public as the victory of the Sabra, and especially of the paratrooper and the pilot. Admiration for the fighting Sabra, exemplified in the romantic figure of Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, then reached its climax. The term “Sabra” made many appearances in the tales of the war that appeared in the press, albums, and songs, all of which waxed ecstatic over the wondrous younger generation produced by Zionism and the IDF. Sabra folklore became one of the trademarks of the IDF’s combat units, especially the paratroopers, the pilots, and the naval commandos.

The Study: Background and Documentary Material

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, at the time of the War of Attrition with Egypt, a new generation (not necessarily in the biological sense) of writers, poets, playwrights, and literary and social scholars rose to challenge the Sabra generation, chiding them for their ideological derivativeness and their one-dimensional view of reality. They criticized with increasing stridency the mobilized writing of the 1948 circle with its focus on the world of the collective, while celebrating critical, anti-establishment writing that focused on the world of the individual and in particular on his distress and alienation. Implied also was criticism of the Sabra character and of the writers who represented it. This period saw the first waves and then a rising tide of secularizers of the Zionist canon, and an antiheroic and critical genre began to appear in the press, in literature, and in film, steadily displacing the mobilized Zionist genre.

Criticism of Sabra literature and the myth it represented intensified in the mid-1970s after the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, when the role of the Sabra as a social model was weakened and his aura dimmed. The Israeli intelligentsia began to see the Sabra in a less heroic light that brought out his human failings and even presented him as a pathetic and ridiculous figure.³⁶ The accounting demanded of the Sabra by these practitioners in different creative fields was part of the intelligentsia’s withdrawal from its infatuation with Israeli power and revolutionary naiveté. It was also part of a campaign of censure against the labor movement, which the public perceived as having degenerated. A satiric television show, “Head Cleaning,” heralded a change of era by directing many of

its barbs at Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, one of the outstanding heroic Sabra figures of 1948.

The trend to secularize Zionist ethos and myths played itself out at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s for a range of social reasons and as the result of historical processes. Among these were the political upset of 1977, which marked the waning of the labor movement and the culture it represented, and the peace treaty with Egypt, which transformed the mythological image of the Arab “Amalek” and so also the Israeli self-image. Then came the Lebanon War (the first war over which the Israeli public was deeply divided), the expansion of the Israeli media (which broke out of the bounds of Israeli culture), and the growing influence of critical postmodern thinking on educated Israelis. During this period, which some refer to as “post-Zionist,” newspaper articles and scholarly books appeared that dealt with what was called, derisively and critically, the “myth of the Sabra.”³⁷

A transmutation of the heroic image of the Sabra occurred in drama as well. The satiric play *Charly Kecharly* by Daniel Horowitz, staged at the end of 1977 at the Khan Theater to mark the country’s thirtieth anniversary, portrayed the Sabra in unflattering terms and caused a controversy.

A similar secularization and examination of the Sabra myth with less subjective eyes took place during these same years in the academic community. The growing distance between Israeli society’s formative and current periods gradually removed the ideological boundaries that earlier historians and sociologists had accepted, consciously or unconsciously. The current scholars’ point of view was more detached and less ethnocentric. The fissures in the once-firm national consensus concerning young Israel and the growing challenges to the status of the political and military establishment, especially after the Lebanon War and the Intifada, were a psychological and intellectual substrate on which dozens of scholarly studies on the Palmach, the War of Independence, and the youth movements quickly sprouted. This research was carried out in a variety of fields—sociology and anthropology, literary studies, history, cinema, psychology, linguistics, education, Middle East studies, and art history. Scholars came to recognize—first largely in the fields of literature and history and later in sociology—that the second generation of the Zionist revolution had unique characteristics, and the term “Sabra” turned from a mythological designation into a scholarly analytical label referring to the elite of Israeli youth in Israel’s formative period.

One reason for the present study is the wealth of publications touching directly and indirectly on Sabra culture—the hundreds of editori-

als, biographies, autobiographies, and scholarly and popular books and articles—that have been written in recent years. It seems to me that the time has come to bring together and synthesize all these works and to delineate, as far as possible, a coherent sociological picture of the generation that was so important in shaping Israeli experience.

Another reason is that, until now, the texts written by the Sabra generation have not been analyzed in a methodical way. I believe that an analysis of the rich documentary material that the Sabras produced can complete the piecing together of the generational mosaic that other scholars have begun. These are texts in which the Sabras expressed their aspirations, their feelings, and their positions on a broad range of matters. This material is referred to by the general rubric “Sabra texts.”

The Sabra as a “Secular Yeshiva Student”

The Zionist revolution is generally presented as a revolution against the traditional Jewish world. Dozens of articles and books, both scholarly and otherwise, have been written on the cultural metamorphosis that Zionism wrought on the Jewish people, a process summed up as “the rejection of the Diaspora.” The Sabra son of the revolution was, in terms of his image, the realization of the aspirations of the generation of the fathers. He was a “gentile” Jew—secular, a skilled farmer and heroic fighter, “worthy of being counted,” finally, among the family of nations. But was Zionist culture really no more than an antithesis of religion? Did the native-born Sabra really become a secular Jew, lacking all religion?

The answer lies in the structural similarity between nationalist ideologies and traditional religions. This similarity can be seen in six principal traits. The first is the striving for a future utopia. Instead of a divine paradise, believers—in communism, fascism, and capitalist liberalism, for example—are offered a social paradise in this world. The second is the mystification and glorification of leaders, sometimes to the point of a cult of personality (largely in extreme, fascist nationalism). The political and ideological leaders of the national movement take the place of the prophets and ecclesiastical hierarchy of traditional religion. The third is the perception of the nation as an exemplary, chosen society that is fulfilling an ancient prophecy under divine supervision. The fourth is the formulation of social ideas in metaphysical and religious terms, such as “redemption,” “covenant,” and “sacrifice.” The fifth is the viewing of reality in terms of absolute values—total identification with the ideology, often to the point of fanaticism; willingness to make huge personal

sacrifices for that ideology; and sharp condemnation of those who diverge from it. The sixth is the institutionalization of nationalist ideas by insinuating them into every area of individual and communal life through taboos, cyclical ritual, symbols, an institutionalized clergy, and places of study.

In the nineteenth century, a number of European thinkers identified the emergence of a type of socio-nationalist revolution that becomes a religious crusade and produces a kind of “secular religion.” Fascinated and troubled by the new relation created in their time between the modern state and traditional religion, they took stock of romantic patriotism, the definition of life goals, the nature of government, and the moral system of a society in which traditional religion was becoming detached from the state. One of the most prominent among these thinkers was French historian Alexis de Tocqueville. He considered the French Revolution “a political revolution that acted as a religious revolution and in a certain sense took its character.” Furthermore, he wrote, “The revolution became a kind of new religion . . . a religion that, like Islam, flooded the country with soldiers, apostles, and martyrs.”³⁸

In 1967 American sociologist Robert Bellah published an article in the journal *Daedalus* entitled “Civil Religion in America.”³⁹ Bellah examined the tight cultural linkage between American nationalism and religion. He was not the first scholar to point out the close cultural tie between American nationalism and Calvinist Christianity,⁴⁰ and the metaphysical character of values in secular American culture, but he was the first who identified religious elements in a culture that had been perceived up until then as secular by its very nature. He created a general theoretical framework for understanding secular symbols, ceremonies, ideals, and myths. Civil religion (there are those today who prefer the terms “national religion” or “secular religion”) is, according to his definition, a religious dimension that exists in the life of every nation through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of a transcendental reality. According to Emile Durkheim, on whose ideas Bellah based his thinking, all social cohesion is founded on a common moral denominator that derives from religious sources. Bellah argues that civil religion is vital to modern society because it creates a prophetic consciousness—a kind of pillar of fire that leads the camp. On one hand, it grants moral legitimacy to the social order; on the other, it establishes moral criteria according to which the society endlessly examines and criticizes itself. It is both a tool to preserve the existing order and a mechanism for constant social change.

The view that links revolution and nationalism to religion has also influenced the study of the Zionist movement. Many historians and sociologists have noted the religious aspect of the pioneer experience and have analyzed the para-religious deep stratum of Zionist culture. The most notable of these are Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don Yehiye,⁴¹ who examined the link between the Zionist movement and religion through a methodical use of Bellah's theory of civil religion. The Zionist revolution, they argue in their study, created a kind of civil religion in Israel, a political and ideological structure that drew its legitimacy from traditional Jewish sources. Traditional Jerusalem, which was molded into new pioneer forms, granted legitimacy to the common Zionist values, united Israeli society under a common identity and a sense of a common fate, and granted depth and significance to the enterprise of the national renaissance.

Zionism, like other national movements that appeared in Europe, America, South Africa, and Australia, quickened hearts, swept along the masses, and grew from a small movement into a national religion that displays all the basic traits enumerated above. The Jewish foundation that preceded Zionism and the ancient, organic link between religion and nation in Judaism strengthened the para-religious dimensions of Zionism and differentiated it from other national religions. The Zionist movement enveloped the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine in a kind of bubble, gave life profound meaning, and included a complex mechanism of commandments, ritual, symbols, mission, and social supervision. The tinder for the new faith was provided by the ancient Jewish yearning for Zion, while the oxygen needed for the fire was provided by European nationalism, modern anti-Semitism, and socialist utopianism. As with other nations, the Jews partially exchanged the transcendental God for the nation, the state, and the homeland, and considered the land they had come to live in as the "promised land."

The pioneer was a devout believer who observed the precepts of patriotism with physical and spiritual valor. He did not simply prepare the soil for commercial exploitation in the Holy Land; he "made the desert bloom" and "drained swamps"—tasks that became a holy and ascetic labor. The soldier who fell defending the Yishuv was a martyr who died sanctifying the homeland (instead of sanctifying God). And the memorials and monuments that were planted in every corner of the country—in numbers that cannot be found in other cultures—became icons and altars on which the cyclical ritual of the national holidays were celebrated. Young people were sworn in year after year at these memorial sites with

an oath committing them to carrying on the sacrifice, because in their deaths the fallen willed the generations that followed not only life but also the sanctity of the national land “on whose altars they fell.” The Yizkor, or memorial prayer, became Zionism’s declaration of faith, and the widely circulated memorial anthologies served as national prayer books, while the memorial siren sounded at the end of Israel’s Memorial Day (a custom instituted after the state was founded and abolished just a few years ago) was like the *shofar* blast at the end of the final Yom Kippur service, making every fiber of the soul tremble and separating the holy from the profane.

The traditional Jewish holidays of Pesach, Hanukkah, Lag Be-Omer, Shavuot, Sukkot, and Purim were refashioned in a way that reduced, and sometimes even eliminated, the religious observances attached to them, while emphasizing their links to the agricultural cycle of planting and harvest. Myths portraying the power of God and the benefits of faith in him were exchanged for historical myths recounting the nation’s strength and heroism and its struggle to escape slavery and achieve political freedom. The traditional holidays were supplemented by days commemorating events in the new Zionist history and holidays deriving from the socio-national ideology of the labor movement (May Day, Balfour Declaration Day, Jewish National Fund Day, Tel Chai Day), and these were celebrated with ceremonies and symbols exemplifying service to the homeland. The plaintive and sentimental “homeland songs” (later called “Land of Israel songs”), sung in mellow, close-knit groups in a nostalgic atmosphere, filled the same function as prayers chanted in the synagogue. After the state was founded, they became the new Jewish liturgy—what writer Amos Oz called the “tom-toms,” urging the tribe to battle. The Zionist religion even created its own version of Hasidic dance—the *hora*, danced by a circle of hand-holding believers in an infectious religious ecstasy.

Like every other religion, Zionism condemned those who deviated from its precepts and castigated schismatics and heretics—in this case, Jews who chose to remain in the Diaspora. The young man who evaded service on the front line, for example, was branded a counterfeit and a degenerate, and the young boy or girl who, voluntarily or involuntarily, did not join a youth movement was dismissed as a “homebody” and perceived as someone who had not been educated properly or who had some sort of character failing. The young person who did not seek out an agricultural or military life was labeled a careerist, and the person who emigrated from the country was called a *yored*, or “descender,” that is, an

apostate and a traitor. The immigrant to Israel, in contrast, was honored with the moral term *oleh*, an “ascender” (note the symbolic use of the concepts of ascent and descent, which recur in various contexts in Jewish religion).

The moshavim and kibbutzim became the sanctuaries of the new national religion. The holy Zionist service was performed there in its purest form—cultivating the nation’s land, settling the country’s distant frontiers, guarding it against attackers, and living a life of cooperation and communal solidarity. The fathers of the kibbutz necessarily became the revered priests of the new religion, and their Sabra children were the novitiates. Many young people volunteered or were sent by educational institutions or youth movements to perform manual labor in the kibbutzim and to establish new settlements, just as young Jewish boys in the Diaspora had been sent to *yeshivot* to study before settling into secular careers. The Sabra was the disciple who was anointed by the pioneer rabbis, the boy serving in the Zionist sanctuary, and the proud and beloved yeshiva student. He was brought up to assume the yoke of the commandments in the high Zionist yeshiva—the youth movement, the Palmach, and the elite units of the Israel Defense Forces—and faithfully met the high expectations of his parents and teachers.

The concept of civil or national religion is no mere metaphor or intellectual plaything. Its purpose is not to cynically compare the present to the past. I agree with other scholars that viewing Israeli society in its formative period as a religious community conducting a total way of life is the best way of understanding the social forces that produced Sabra culture and personality. This book is meant to present the visible as well as the latent elements of the Zionist secular religion and to reveal the deep psychosociological link between this religion and the Sabra, who is its product.

This book is a sociohistorical portrait of the Israeli elite at its origins. It does not deal with the chronology of historical events and does not focus on organizations, institutions, and ideologies. Rather, it seeks to find the common ground underneath the diversity and to present a sociological overview, in an effort to grasp the spirit of the time in which Zionist idealism was at its peak.